

Book Review

Pragmatism and the Reflective Life

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Stuart Rosenbaum, *Pragmatism and the Reflective Life*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009. 196 + xii pp. ISBN 978-0-7391-3238-8. \$29.95 (pbk.)

In *Pragmatism and the Reflective Life*, Stuart Rosenbaum deftly weaves moral themes around the locus of pragmatism, using these themes to defend the titular “reflective life.” The leading figure here is John Dewey, who, in his writings on democracy, community, and morality, provides the basis for reflective living. Rosenbaum, in explicating the main ways pragmatism deviates from traditional historical philosophical models, provides a clear explanation of pragmatism to his readers. He achieves his main goal, clarifying the meaning of pragmatism and its attendant democratic ideology: ecumenism.

Rosenbaum states that “the content of the reflective life . . . is its commitment to autonomy, community, and ideality” (157). He approaches these themes through chapters entitled, “Pragmatism,” “From Moral Theory to the Reflective Life,” “The Reflective Life,” “Ideals,” “Deliberation,” “Education,” and “Ecumenism.” Rosenbaum, in “Pragmatism,” sets the stage for the exploration of the reflective life and provides a clear and concise understanding of the nature of pragmatism, especially in regard to the work of John Dewey.

To begin with, says Rosenbaum, one must understand what features distinguish pragmatism from traditional Western philosophy—its focus on experience and its endorsement of radical empiricism. In regard to the former, Rosenbaum underscores “the central intellectual commitment of the pragmatist tradition, the idea that experience itself is the source of its own guidance; experience itself is the source of aims and methods, principles, goals, and ideals that may yield better experience

and better institutions.” He further notes that “experience does not need the guide of external authority; it needs no external control to achieve betterment” (25). In regard to the latter, he lays out three definitive differences between the radical empiricism of pragmatists and traditional empiricism. The first difference, Rosenbaum makes clear, is that pragmatism treats epistemology and metaphysics as socially and culturally embedded (26). Pragmatists are especially attuned to how metaphysical and epistemological problems stem from specific contexts: “Since pragmatists see all phenomena, even sophisticated intellectual phenomena, as fully embedded within cultural and ecological contexts, they think that understanding such phenomena requires understanding those contexts. This respect for cultural context is *the second definitive difference* between pragmatism and classical empiricism” (26-27). This respect for culture is manifested in a genealogical understanding of moral problems. In other words, moral problems arise through and in specific cultural contexts.

The third difference Rosenbaum identifies stems from pragmatism’s respect for science. Science, considered as a tool, “enables cognitive interactions within human environments, cultural and natural, but it does not enable knowledge transcending those environments” (29). Pragmatism’s rejection of the quest for transcendent knowledge is, in fact, the main theme underlying the differences between radical empiricism and classical empiricism. This pragmatic theme is clearly illustrated in the works of John Dewey. Rosenbaum makes this theme explicit, stating that “pragmatists do not seek conceptual universality, conceptual necessity, or a priori knowledge. Instead, pragmatists see humans as thoroughly embedded in their natural world, and this embedding includes their concepts and their ability to manipulate those concepts” (2). This position distinguishes pragmatists from philosophers of other traditions. Rosenbaum continues: “Conceptual universality, necessity, and a priori knowledge, the primary goals of analytic philosophers, are not goals for pragmatists because pragmatists do not regard those things as separable in thought from the widest possible human agreement about how to use ideas of morality and religion to seek better lives for individuals and communities” (2-3). Here Rosenbaum brings Dewey into the conversation, noting that he reacted against those strains of “Western thought that seek transcendence for humanity,” by recalling “humanity back to the natural world” (4).

According to Rosenbaum, the recognition of the import of cultural context—and moral genealogies—allow humans to lead the reflective life. Rosenbaum continues to display a solid grasp of pragmatism in his chapter on deliberation, a main theme in pragmatist ethics, and one related to social and cultural appreciation. As Rosenbaum artfully explains, agents deliberate when faced with difficult situations (107). In these situations, one is required to “*be deliberate* about one’s action” because “one does not rely on habitual responses” (108). Confronting an unusual situation, one’s patterns of actions—habits—are interrupted. It is here that one partakes in what John Dewey calls “imaginative rehearsal.” Rosenbaum writes: “As Dewey puts it, deliberation is imaginative rehearsal and is dramatic and active. Deliberation is seeing possibilities for problem situations and trying out possibilities before acting in accord with them”

(111). This is a vital part of both morality and human psychology. When faced with a problematic situation, dramatic rehearsal allows us to foresee the outcome of each possible path of action and to review them psychologically before actually acting.

Rosenbaum, continuing to draw from Dewey, ties deliberation and community together before discussing ecumenism. Borrowing from Peirce, Rosenbaum explains that to overcome the traditional divide between the emotional and rational, beliefs must be considered as habits of action (111-12). These habits arise from the social conditions existing within our communities. Rosenbaum explains, “What are pragmatists’ reasons for accepting the idea that beliefs are habits of action? A key reason is pragmatists’ embrace of the historicity of all human phenomena . . . The things that seem most obvious and patently true—even things thought of as *a priori*—seem so because of cultural conditions” (114). Here, Rosenbaum allows one to see the overlap between action as habit and the genealogy of historical phenomena in pragmatist thinking. In short, beliefs stem from history; communities form individuals. Nevertheless, the individual and the community are sometimes at odds.

The tension between individuality and community is reconciled in education: “This symbiotic integration [of community and individuality] needs, as Dewey also saw, an understanding of education that enables *both* growth of individuality *and* integrity of community” (134-35). Education is not merely fact oriented. Rather, it must also be habit oriented; “education becomes a matter of engendering habits, of habit-offering; and learning becomes a matter of acquiring habits, of habit-taking” (138). Because, for pragmatists, persons are biological organisms and, as such, are not independent from their environments (137), education must encourage the development of different abilities from one context to another (138). Everything in an environment is significant to the learner, as learning instills habits, and “all education is value education” (151). Education provides the skills and capacities for an individual, but it is through deliberation—dramatic rehearsal of possibilities—that an individual adjusts and adapts to an environment, while still choosing her own moral possibilities from a given set of conditions.

Institutional inertia is one threat that an environment often poses. It is also an obstacle to the goal of ecumenism, defined by Rosenbaum as “the goal of a shared understanding of values, even though these values may be rooted in different traditions” (158). With regard to religion, for example, ecumenism “is the idea of overcoming institutional inertia in the direction of unity with other religious institutions” (158). Preserving tradition, a defense of institutional inertia, is, as Rosenbaum explains, merely exclusive. It is an excuse to maintain the status quo and exclude those who hold different values and beliefs and thus might change that tradition. In fact, the inclusivity or exclusivity of institutions is the deciding factor in the desirability of ecumenism. Rosenbaum defends ecumenism’s inclusivity, stating that those who argue against it merely defend the status quo and “perpetuate an intellectual culture oriented around issues of justification” (160). He challenges ecumenism’s detractors, insisting that “those who participate even as critics or skeptics are in effect supporters, intentionally or not, of that same institutional inertia” (161).

Pragmatism relates to ecumenism because to understand humans “as integral parts of their natural world, and to see them as having developed in diverse, geographically different communities but also having . . . common needs and interests . . . is to understand also that there are possibilities to overcome diversity in the direction of greater integration and harmony” (162). Democracy is best suited to accommodate ecumenism. Democracy maximizes the potential for both individual growth and autonomy and “encourages ideals of community integrity and individual achievement” (162). On Dewey’s account, autonomy, community, and ideality come together. According to Rosenbaum, “values and ideals are as concrete as the humans who hold them” (157). Their concreteness makes pragmatic commitments to meliorism and ecumenism possible since “the very fact that they are rooted in human institutions, along with our knowledge of the vicissitudes of such institutions, encourages the idea that they are as malleable as other dimensions of culture” (158).

It is in this last chapter on ecumenism, however, that Rosenbaum runs into some difficulties. If, as Rosenbaum states, values are made concrete in the form of human institutions, then what privileges Rosenbaum’s pragmatic values (autonomy, integrity, and achievement) above nondemocratic values? If we must be ecumenical, should we also seek to subsume “non-reflective” lives under those values integral to “reflective” lives? Or, must we overlook Rosenbaum’s earlier Deweyan claims that values are institutional, and claim instead that values are in effect worthwhile independent of their institutional contexts?

Aside from these few minor issues, *Pragmatism and the Reflective Life* is a fine work by someone who admits he came to pragmatism late in his academic career. Though Rosenbaum’s chapter on ecumenism leaves one asking many questions, the strengths of the work far outweigh its weaknesses. Rosenbaum clearly understands the tradition of American pragmatism and, though his analysis relies heavily on John Dewey, he also mentions the works of James, Peirce, and even Royce. His clarity of thought runs through and unifies the variety of themes present in his book—ethical deliberation, imagination, cultural contextualization, and education—and ends in the hope for ecumenism and global melioration, for humans to work worldwide to improve our condition and that of others. The interweaving of themes belies the very bedrock of pragmatism—to live rather than theorize a philosophical outlook. In this way, Rosenbaum also accomplishes the task of recapturing the spirit of pragmatism, separating it from the naïve view of pragmatism motivating savvy business practices and common-sense politics. *Pragmatism and the Reflective Life* makes a fine addition to any bookshelf, whether it be that of a beginner in philosophy, or one who has devoted one’s life to studying this unique American tradition.

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